DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 161 044 CS 204 422

AUTHOR Sipple, Jo-Ann M.
TITLE Error Analysis: How to Translate It into Positive Teaching.
PUB DATE 78
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (29th, Denver, Colorado, March 30-April 1, 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Composition Skills (Literary); *English Instruction; *Error Analysis (Language); Higher Education; *Models; Secondary Education; *Teaching Techniques

ABSTRACT

Error analysis can provide teachers with a foundation for creating practical writing experiences for students and can allow the teacher to examine errors for linguistic features appropriate and inappropriate to the social context of writing. Teachers tend to call for a finished, error-free product, a polished final paper instead of using error analysis to discover possible patterns of error. Process-oriented writing programs involve a series of small interactive steps between teacher and student in which organization, logical thinking, and syntactic maturity are some of the subgoals in the task of writing effectively. General studies in error analysis report frequency and kind of error while specific studies look more to teaching implications. One model for using error analysis in the teaching process translates student errors into positive teaching points and then puts each teaching point through a sequence of writing tasks in order to produce modular instruction around each point. (A graphic illustration of the model is included in the paper.) (TJ)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED161044

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

ERROR ANALYSIS: HOW TO TRANSLATE IT INTO POSITIVE TEACHING

by

Jo-Ann M. Sipple

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Jo-Ann M. Sipple

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

A Paper Presented at the

Conference on College Composition and Communication

Denver, Colorado

March 30 - April 1, 1978

CS204422

ERROR ANALYSIS: HOW TO TRANSLATE IT INTO POSITIVE TEACHING

The word "Basics" announced as the unifying theme of our 4 C's meeting in '76, echoed as an important concern in '77, and printed as the catch word in many subsequent publications is today's point of reference. Our examination of the "Basics" led us to consider not only those elements basic to our students' writing, but perhaps more importantly for us "Basics" has come to include all those teaching strategies, curricula, and attitudes that are part of teaching and learning writing. And the theme of this conference, "Excellence in What We Do: Our Attitude Toward Teaching Composition," should remind us once more to think about our fundamental attitudes toward teaching and learning writing.

My immediate concern is with only one aspect of these attitudes, that is, our stated or, more often, unstated attitudes toward error in student writing. I believe we should be asking what we ought to do with the growing research in error analysis in order to positively affect the teaching and learning of writing. Or more specifically, as the title of my paper suggests, the real question is can we translate error analysis into positive teaching strategies and practices.

In order to answer this question, I would like to do three things today: 1) present some attitudes (approaches) to error and error analysis, 2) review some general and specific studies in error analysis, and 3) present my model for translating error analysis into positive teaching (writing) practices. But first let me define the terms error and error analysis. I use the word error to refer to the mistakes students make in writing the standard dialect--mistakes that range from those abstract problems in logic to those more concrete features in punctuation--and the term error analysis to refer to the

researched tabulation and examination of frequency and kind of mistake found in student writing.

In presenting one view toward the kinds of error found in standard writing, Wolfram and Fasold in their book, The Study of Social Dialects in American English, concede that for certain kinds of official writing only standard English is appropriate. They place the responsibility of helping students to acquire efficient use of this dialect squarely on the shoulders of the English teacher and distinguish three categories of error in writing the standard dialect: 1) problems in organization and logic not at all related to dialect differences; 2) spelling and grammar errors caused by interference from a nonstandard dialect; and 3) errors in spelling, punctuation, and grammar not traceable to dialect interference at all.[1]

At last year's conference, though the precise connection between error analysis and teaching practices was never the topic of any session, there were separate sessions dealing with each. In one of last year's sessions on teacher attitudes toward student error, a speaker classified various approaches toward error in standard writing into three areas: 1) corrective analysis in which there is no attempt to discover a pattern of error, 2) contrastive analysis in which there is an attempt to discover dialect interference features in the comprehension and production of standard writing, and 3) error analysis as a problem-solving task in which there is an attempt to discover the rhetorical and linguistic reasons behind the occurrence of error. The first two attitudes toward error are reflected in many product-oriented writing programs, that is, those programs which demand from students a one-time final, polished paper that is error free and allows for no intermediary steps for approaching the numerous and varied problem-solving tasks of writing. In contrast, the last attitude toward error is reflected in process-oriented writing programs or those programs

which permit the teacher to work with student writing in continuous small steps in which organization, logical thinking, and syntactic maturity are some of the subgoals in the complex task of writing effective composition.

Of course, I am a supporter of the third attitude (error analysis) whereby we can study error for its frequent linguistic common sense, determine what sociolinguistic issues, if any, are at stake, and thereby develop a writing pedagogy that offers students practical experience in using acceptable conventions in their writing. If we adopt the third attitude toward error, error analysis as a problem-solving task, we of course dismiss the view of student error only as deviation from the norm--some flaw to be immediately eliminated and highly penalized.

At this point let me call upon the testimony of Mina Shaughnessy's book, Errors and Expectations, which I believe supports the third attitude, for it is there that she suggests we analyze student error for the insights it gives us about our students' innate linguistic sense. She examines student errors herself in order to discover some of the intelligent reasons for their occurrence. For example, she comments on students' punctuation preferences for commas rather than periods when she writes,

> However unconventional a student's punctuation appears to be, it is always worth studying for the insights it gives into his perception of sentence boundaries and of specific punctuation marks. Thus although most writers at this level would say that periods are used at the ends of sentences, it appears from their punctuation habits that the writers often perceive sentences to be rhetorical units that are longer or shorter than the grammatical sentence. Furthermore there often appears to be a psychological resistance to the period--perhaps because it imposes an end on a unit the writer has usually had difficulty beginning or doesn't want to finish. It says that the writer must mobilize himself for another beginning, almost always a formidable task for an inexperienced writer. Commas, however, are not final, yet they hold things together. Besides, as one student who had randomly sprinkled commas throughout his essay explained, "They're so cheap."[2]

In this year's February issue of CCC Andrea Lunsford in her article, "Remedial Writing," reports on errors found in her own remedial students' writing which averaged seventeen errors per paragraph or one mistake in every eight words written. Lunsford believes that teachers should subscribe to a sensitive understanding and honest treatment of error. She says,

> Many teachers decry what they see as an overemphasis on error in remedial classes, and their warnings should be heeded to some extent. The teacher who attempts to attack all error at once will only confuse and discourage the student. And the teacher who teaches grammar as divorced from the student's own writing will no doubt fail to help the student improve. Nevertheless, most remedial writing students are greatly concerned with error and view the teacher's avoidance of it as a general cop-out or a tacit admission of defeat.[3]

Thus although we as teachers have the responsibility to bring error to our students' attention, the way we do it not only reflects our attitudes toward it but also makes us successful or unsuccessful in helping them develop strategies for writing acceptable standard English.

With these warnings about teacher attitude toward student error, let me approach my second task today by reviewing some general and specific researched studies in error analysis. Note that the general studies report frequency and kind while the specific studies look more to the teaching implications.

In the general studies for teaching and learning writing, Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer's Research in Written Composition[4] stands out as one of the most significant. It contains over a hundred synopses of different kinds of studies in writing including those that measure frequency and kind of error. John C. Mellon's National Assessment and the Teaching of English[5] is another general source that contains a section describing frequency of error found in the writing of students at various grade levels. Mellon's work offers some statistical information in a table of "mechanics, errors per 100 words of writing" and lists frequency and kind in several sample populations. The list

includes writing problems such as spelling, punctuation, capitalization, fragments, run-ons, awkward constructions, agreement, and word choice.[6]

Paul B. Diederich's Measuring Growth in English[7] provides yet another kind of information on error for teaching writing by describing the evaluation procedures used by college English teachers of writing. In his sample population of one thousand writing teachers, Diederich finds that teachers use six common evaluative criteria for grading composition. The first of these combines organization and content, the second grammar and usage. (Diederich defines grammar as the set of rules governing the use of standard English and usage as the choice in syntax, punctuation, spelling, and diction made by the writer.) Although the teachers themselves report that organization and content are the most important evaluation criteria, Diederich notes that "the highest percentage of comments [are on] errors in usage, sentence structure, punctuation, and spelling."[8] Diederich reports further that "seven out of ten college English teachers" focus their comments on grammar and usage and that they penalize their students most for errors in these two areas.

Two more general studies which provide criteria for measuring written composition on a national scale indicate the direction of assessing the standard formal writing of students. Common Sense and Testing in English[9] is one report which provides a bare sketch of error analysis in student writing and recommends sentence combining/sentence embedding tasks be used as criteria for evaluating student composition.[10] And The Measurement of Writing Ability[11] not only lists the criteria for good writing but also offers correlation data between the predictors and criteria. This study realistically presents advantages and disadvantages to evaluating student writing--presenting the variation of grading among evaluators as the greatest disadvantage.

Although the general studies contain much statistical data to support the relatively high frequency of student error, none of them has analyzed the problbems cited in detail. Most are limited to reporting the fact that certain errors appear without investigating the precise features of them. For example, The Measurement of Writing Ability (just mentioned) provides statistical data showing the correlations between frequency and kind of student errors on objective tests and essay-type samples.

In contrast to the general studies in error analysis, the specific studies analyze each student error by dividing the general problem areas mentioned into specific features of language use. And in this area of error analysis, research is growing. Among the studies of this kind are Rosaline K. Chiu's article, "Describing the Grammatical-Statistical Patterns in Registers: Towards the Making of Pedagogical Grammars"; Paul J. Angelis's article, "Sentence Combining, Error Analysis, and the Teaching of Writing"; John C. Fisher's book Linguistics and Remedial English; Mina P. Shaughnessy's book, Errors and Expectations. Although each of these sources contains a different perspective on error, each makes specific contributions to the nearly unmanageable number of factors in error analysis.

Chiu's purpose in her article, "Describing the Grammatical-Statistical Patterns in Registers," is to argue for register-oriented pedagogical grammars and to offer many examples of register features grouped into frequency patterns for the register of each dialect. Thus, she is able to list the most frequent register features in standard formal writing. For example, she cites the punctuation procedures in sentences combined with semicolons and transitional markers. (The register consists of features common to a given dialect but differentiated in use according to social context.)

Chiu suggests that a pedagogical grammar could be based on the tabulation of frequency patterns of items that recur in what she calls "administrative formal English," that is, standard formal writing, and focuses on elements for the preparation of such grammars in writing programs. She believes that the descriptive grammars are not practical teaching devices and must be replaced by pedagogical grammars in educational settings. She argues, "Though these [descriptive] grammars provide comprehensive descriptions of the code or exhaustive explanations of the competence of the native speaker, they seldom provide information on usage--information on how the code works in real life situations, or what the native speaker does with the code to meet the multifarious communication needs of everyday life."[12]

In his article, "Sentence Combining, Error Analysis and the Teaching of Writing," Paul J. Angelis proposes that error analysis be the basis for designing all writing programs and divides the error analysis into two major types, syntactic and rhetorical. Angelis suggests that teaching strategies be built around specifically defined areas in those categories. For example, he cites word order, sequence of tenses, and repetition of connectives as common areas of syntactic error. Angelis makes two points: First, broad error analysis on the basis of frequency counts is an initial step in the teaching of writing. Second, sentence combining practices, which have been shown to be helpful in strengthening the writing skills of both native and non-native speakers of English, should be incorporated in writing programs for college students.[13]

John C. Fisher's book-length study, Linguistics and Remedial English, presents several detailed analyses of error in college writing. Fisher notes the inadequacy of past research in this area but is able to list some sources, as those of Lyman and Pressey, which compile lists of "common error."[14] Fisher nevertheless criticizes these studies and other like them for their failure

"to break down the errors within each classification."[15] He then provides his own compilations of student error in writing. Fisher's breakdown of two-hundred and eighty errors in syntax and morphology includes the features accompanying the errors in each category and is supported by the data of actual student composition. His ultimate purpose is to use the error analysis as a basis for establishing his method of remediation, an oral pattern practice method, which he claims to have adopted from the English Language Institute.[16]

The few sources I have mentioned here are by no means exhaustive, but they illustrate the kind of resources available in researched error analysis. If they offer us nothing else, these sources will at least corroborate our own discoveries of error in the student compositions we evaluate. However, if we look more closely at studies in error analysis, we will probably discover that these resources also offer valuable insights about our student's linguistic and rhetorical sense--insights that might help us develop more effective pedagogies for composition.

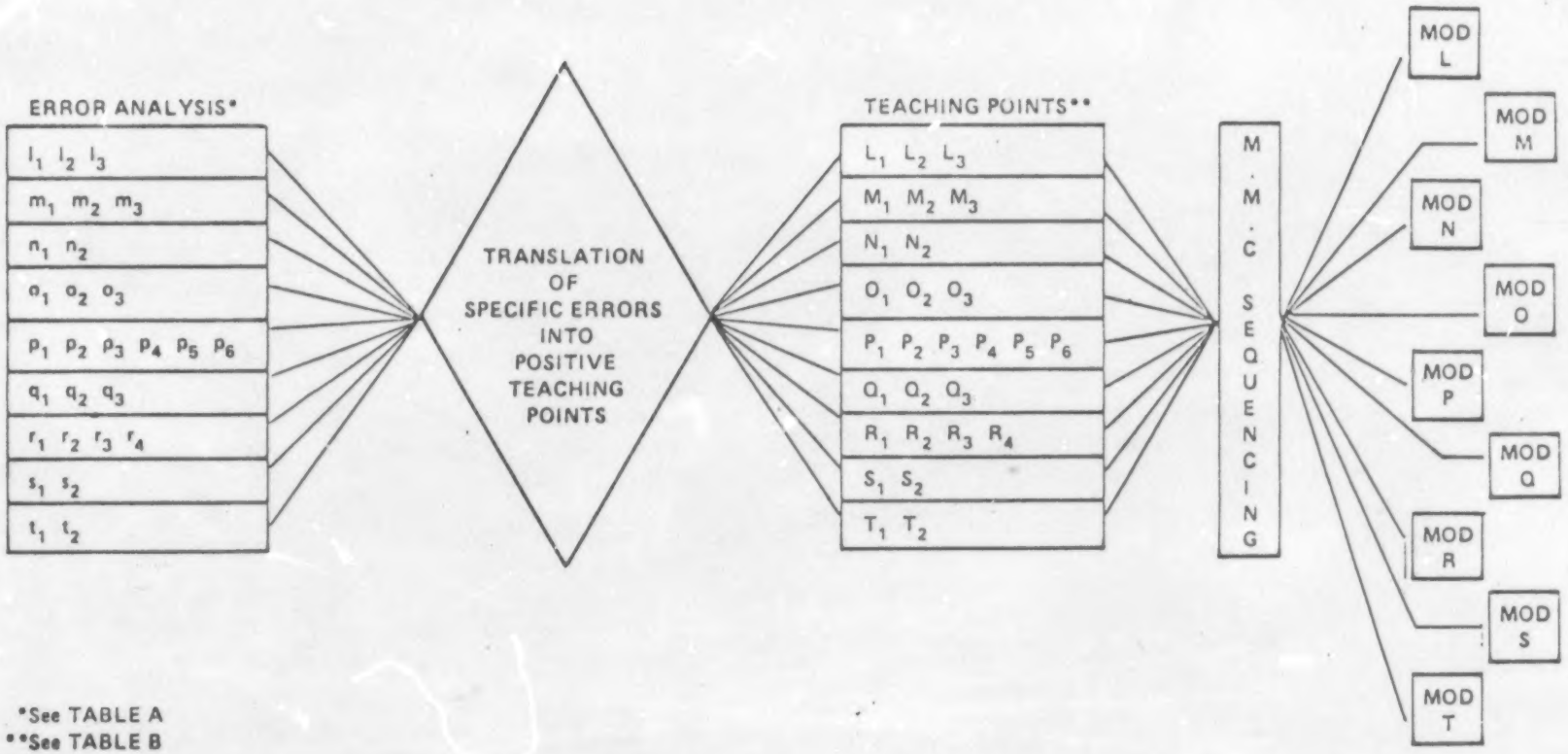
Before I turn to my third task today and present my model for translating error analysis into positive teaching practices, let me outline a procedure for using error analysis in teaching--whether you have accumulated the data yourself from your own students' compositions or whether you rely on any of the available studies. First, the accumulated data should be studied error by error for obvious features that accompany the error. Second, if possible, the errors should be arranged in clusters; that is, those errors which contain the same accompanying features should be grouped together. Third, the positive accompanying features of these errors or groups should be used in writing practices that force the students to tackle writing tasks in which these errors would be likely to occur. Fourth and finally, there should be a sequence of

writing tasks around the use of the positive (acceptable) features in the writing tasks.

Here, then, is my pedagogical design of a model program (See Model on next page) using error analysis. It is a model for translating student errors into positive teaching points, and then putting each teaching point through a sequence of writing tasks in order to produce, in this case, modular instruction around each point.

Let's take one of these errors in the Error Analysis box and look at the accompanying features (See sample from Table A). Now look at the corresponding teaching points after the translation of the error analysis into the teaching points (See sample from Table B). Note that the kind of error and corresponding teaching points illustrated here fall into the category of mechanics and that errors in logic or organization present more difficult translation challenges for the teacher.

DESIGN OF MODEL PROGRAM
To Improve Standard Formal Writing



*See TABLE A
**See TABLE B

Jo-Ann M. Sipple
1977

(from) TABLE A

COMMON ERRORS FOUND IN STANDARD FORMAL WRITING	DESCRIPTION OF SELECTED [illegible] FOUND IN STRUCTURES CO[illegible] THE ERRORS	TYPICAL EXAMPLES OF STRUCTURES CONTAINING THE ERRORS
	m1. sequenced structures in which pronouns are used to introduce the second structure	1. This was an easy job, it did not take long.
Run-On Sentence and/or Comma Splice	m2. sequenced structures in which words or derivatives of words from the first structure appear in the second	2. This painting job is easy I can paint very fast.
	m3. sequenced structures in which conjunctive adverbs: however, instead, therefore, nevertheless, etc., are used	3. I should have gone home, instead I decided to play basketball.

(from) TABLE B

MODULE	TEACHING POINTS
	M1. Standard punctuation in sequenced structures in which a pronoun is used to introduce the second structure of the sequence
Mod M Run-On Sentence and Comma Splice Module	M2. Standard punctuation in sequenced structures in which a word or word derivative which appears in the first structure is repeated in the second
	M3. Standard punctuation in sequenced structures which contain conjunctive adverbs in the second structure.

Let me finally suggest that the use of error analysis as information resource rather than as a list of items to be eliminated in student writing can positively affect the teaching of writing in two ways: 1) it allows the teacher fo formulate a holistic attitude himself and examine error for linguistic features appropriate and inappropriate to the social context of the writing, and 2) it provides a foundation for creating practical writing experiences that will expand the student's writing repertoire. In this way the translation of error analysis into positive teaching can result in the creation of writing pedagogies that grow out of our sensitivity to the complex problems in writing.

NOTES

[1]Walter Wolfram and Ralph Fasold, The Study of Social Dialects in American English (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1974), p. 203

[2]Mina P. Shaughnessy, Errors and Expectations: A Guide For the Teacher of Basic Writing (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 18.

[3]Andrea Lunsford, "Remedial Writing," CCC, 29 (February 1978), p. 50.

[4]Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer, Research in Written Composition (Champaign, Illinois: NCTE, 1963).

[5]John C. Mellon, National Assessment and the Teaching of English (Urbana, Illinois: NCTE, 1975).

[6]Mellon, p. 31.

[7]Paul B. Diederich, Measuring Growth in Englisn (Urbana, Illinois: NCTE, 1974).

[8]Diederich, p. 7.

[9]Common Sense and Testing in English (Urbana, Illinois: NCTE, 1975).

[10]Common Sense, pp. 19-20.

[11]The Measurement of Writing Ability (New York: College Entrance Examination Board, 1966).

[12]Rosaline K. Chiu, "Describing the Grammatical-Statistical Patterns in Registers: Towards the Making of Pedagogical Grammars" (paper at TESOL meeting, Denver, 1974: ERIC microfiche, ED 098 571), pp. 4-6.

[13]Paul J. Angelis, "Sentence Combining, Error Analysis, and the Teaching of Writing" (paper at TESOL meeting, Los Angeles, 1975: ERIC microfiche, ED 103 882), p. 77.

[14]John C. Fisher, Linguistics and Remedial English (The Hague: Mouton, 1966), p. 14.

[15]Fisher, p. 15.

[16]See Fisher, p. 17.